



Wildlife Food Plot

Conservation Practice Job Sheet

645

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) - Illinois

June 2000

DEFINITION

A food plot is an annual or perennial planting of grain, or grass and/or legumes to provide food for a variety of wildlife on rural land.



USES OF FOOD PLOTS

Many wildlife species depend on and prefer native weed seeds and wild fruits for winter food. Additional high-quality food can be provided in the form of green browse or standing grain food plots. A food plot adds plant diversity, food and cover to the landscape. They are often planned to provide a winter or early spring food source as well as cover. Where fall plowing buries the majority of crop residue, food plots are an excellent choice to improve wildlife survival.

Without a reliable food source, even the best winter cover is useless to wildlife.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

ALL FOOD PLOTS

- Make food plots at least 30 feet wide.
- 20 percent is the maximum amount of an area that should be in food plots.
- Locate food plots on the least erosive soils of each field. Adequate vegetative cover must be developed and maintained to provide both wildlife and erosion control benefits

- Food plots may be located on slopes greater than 5% provided soil losses do not exceed tolerable levels. Food plots should be planted on the contour.
- Adequately lime and fertilize food plots to ensure successful establishment, growth, and production.
- Plantings shall be seeded at the proper time to ensure establishment and maturity of food plants.

ANNUAL FOOD PLOTS - Grain crops, beneficial for wildlife, planted and left unharvested for wildlife food and cover.

- The recommended food plot size is 2-5 acres with a minimum size of 1/4 acre. One 1/4 acre food plot per 20 to 40 acres of permanent cover is generally sufficient for bobwhite quail. If it is expected that deer will be feeding heavily in the food plot, increase the size to 2-5 acres. Grain sorghum (milo) is recommended for quail. For ring-necked pheasants, blocks of corn and grain sorghum (milo), or forage sorghum, 2 to 5 acres in size is preferred.
- Where food is a limiting factor plan at least one annual food plot for every 40 acres.
- Weed control is not required, as the presence of annuals such as foxtail and ragweed benefit wildlife by providing higher protein and greater number of seeds than domestic grains.
- Locate food plots adjacent to winter cover and on the downwind side.
- In open country, corn or grain sorghum (milo) food plots must provide winter cover as well as emergency food. To maximize cover benefits, these food plots should be block-shaped with sides at least 300 feet wide (2 acres). These plots should be 2 to 5 acres in size.
- Where possible, locate grain food plots adjacent to winter cover. In all cases locate the food plot within 660 feet of dense winter cover. If there is no winter cover in the area, design the plot to

provide winter cover as well as food (see previous paragraph). Another option for winter cover is to construct brushpiles (15 feet X 15 feet X 8 feet high) adjacent to food plots to provide the needed cover. Construct at least 6 brushpiles per acre of food plot if winter cover is lacking.

- Sorghum seeds are rich in energy, persistent on the plant, and usually available to wildlife when snow or ice covers other seeds. If only one grain is to be planted, grain sorghum (milo) will give the best results
- Avoid planting food plots closer than 50 feet on the north side of trees or tall shrubs that will shade the plot.

Recommended species and broadcast seeding rates for wildlife food plots.	
Single grain	Pounds/acre* (broadcast rate)
grain sorghum (milo)	16
corn	15
sunflowers	8
oats	50
wheat	50
buckwheat	40
millet	20
cowpea	20
partridge pea	15
Grain Mixtures	Pounds per Acre* (broadcast rate)
1. grain sorghum (milo)	8
soybean	12
2. grain sorghum (milo)	8
soybean	8
millet	2
3. grain sorghum (milo)	12
sunflowers	8
4. grain sorghum (milo)	8
corn	8

*These rates can be reduced by 50% if drilled or row planted.

GREEN BROWSE FOOD PLOTS - Perennial grass and/or legumes planted to provide high quality forage and open space for deer, rabbit, turkey, and other wildlife species.

- Green browse food plot should be at least one acre but not more than 5 acres.
- The site should be open, tillable and next to suitable cover. Place the plot at least 50 feet from any woodland edge to reduce competition from trees and

allow sunlight to reach the planting. A buffer strip of native perennial grasses and forbs, and/or woody shrubs should be encouraged to develop over time between the browse plot and the timber.

Preferred Seeding:

- Seed 30 pounds (1/2 bushel) per acre wheat and 2 pounds per acre of orchard grass in the fall (follow seeding dates for cool season grasses).
- At the time of seeding, overseed one-half of the plot with a seed mixture consisting of 1 pound per acre of ladino clover and 2 pounds per acre of red clover.
- The following spring (January - March) the other one-half of the food plot should be over-seeded with 10 pounds per acre of lespedeza (Korean, Kobe, Marion, Summit or a mix of these). Note: Annual lespedezas are limited to Plant Suitability Zones 2 and 3 only. Partridge pea may be substituted for annual lespedeza.

Alternative seeding:

- Seed with 30 pounds (1/2 bushel) per acre wheat, 6 pounds per acre alfalfa, and 4 pounds per acre red clover.

FERTILIZER AND LIME CONSIDERATIONS

To determine the need for commercial fertilizer and liming materials, a soil test from the current planting year or during the previous two years is recommended for annual and perennial food plots.

ANNUAL FOOD PLOTS:

- Apply commercial fertilizer 50-75% of the Illinois Agronomy Guide recommended rate per acre of each nutrient for the species being established for a low to moderate yield goal. If a soil test is not available, apply 350 lbs. of 20-10-10, or equivalent, per acre. Where legumes are a component of the seed mixture nitrogen should be limited to 30 lbs. per acre.

GREEN BROWSE FOOD PLOTS:

- Apply commercial fertilizer 75-100% of the Illinois Agronomy Guide recommended rate per acre of each nutrient for a 3-ton yield goal for the species being established.
- Apply lime to raise the pH to 6.5 for Alfalfa or 6.0 for other legume species. Liming materials shall be applied and incorporated prior to seeding.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

ALL FOOD PLOTS

- Control all noxious weeds as identified by state and local laws, by: (1) treating with chemicals per label directions, or (2) spot mow in early summer before seed heads form.
- If food plots are relocated or discontinued, the site will be re-established to acceptable cover.
- Protect food plots from unplanned haying and grazing. Fences may need to be constructed and maintained to manage grazing.

ANNUAL FOOD PLOTS

- Each year one-half of the grain food plot should be planted with the other half allowed to grow annual plants that volunteer. Rotate this sequence the following year.

GREEN BROWSE FOOD PLOTS

- Green browse plots should be mowed annually, at 4 to 6 inches, between July 1 and July 15 to maintain palatability of browse.
- Renovate and re-establish plots when legume canopy cover drops below 30% (generally in 3 to 4 years).

Wildlife Food Plot - Specifications Sheet

Species	Seeding Dates	(1) Seeding Rate Bulk lbs/ac.	(2) Acres to be seeded	(1x2) Total bulk pounds needed

Specific Recommendations:

Scheduled Date _____

Companion Crop _____

Seedbed Preparation Method _____

Lime - Fertilizer
Recommendations _____

Prior Herbicide Use:

Type: _____

Year: _____

Type: _____

Year: _____

Note: Plant corn or sorghum on fields where Atrazine carryover may be a problem.

Additional Operation and
Maintenance _____

Map of food plot locations and dimensions (or attach map):

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